

Three objections to Aristotelian virtue ethics¹

In this handout, we discuss three objections facing Aristotelian virtue ethics. For a discussion of what this theory claims, see the handouts ‘Aristotle on eudaimonia, function and virtue’, ‘Aristotle on virtue’ and ‘Aristotle on practical wisdom’. For discussion of fourth objection, see ‘Virtue and eudaimonia’.

GUIDANCE ON HOW TO ACT

A first issue facing Aristotle’s virtue ethics is whether it can provide us with any helpful guidance on how to act. What does Aristotle say that can help us decide what to do?

Many philosophers have thought that Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean should function in this way. But it isn’t much help. First, ‘too much’ and ‘too little’ aren’t quantities on a single scale. The list of ‘right time, right object, right person, right motive, right way’ shows that things are much more complicated than that. Second, it gives us no help with understanding, for example, how often we should get angry, and how angry we should get. Just about anything could be ‘in the mean’ if the circumstances were right!

But it is unlikely that Aristotle intended the doctrine of the mean to be helpful in this way. We can’t ‘figure out’ what it is right to do by applying a rule like the doctrine of the mean; we must have practical wisdom. Aristotle says explicitly that what is in the mean is ‘determined by the person of practical wisdom’. And life is complicated; so practical wisdom isn’t about applying easy rules either. It’s about ‘seeing’ what to do, which requires virtues of character and lots of experience.

But does Aristotle’s theory of practical wisdom provide any guidance about what to do? If I have practical wisdom, it seems that I simply know what to do. But if I do not have practical wisdom, what then? Knowing that the right action is what a virtuous person would do doesn’t help me, because I don’t know what the virtuous person would do! Aristotle seems to admit as much when he says that practical wisdom requires virtue. Without a good character, I cannot understand what is truly good. But this means that knowledge of the good is not within everyone’s reach. Either Aristotle’s theory provides no guidance to anyone who isn’t virtuous, or his theory is wrong because we are all sufficiently rational to understand what is right and wrong.

Aristotle argues that this is too simple. Knowledge of the good can come in degrees, and we can improve or destroy our ability to know what is good by the kind of character we develop. If someone has a completely depraved character,

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 310-5

perhaps they really don't know what is good or bad. But most people will have enough understanding of the good to make moral decisions. Furthermore, people can improve their knowledge of what is good by becoming more virtuous people.

In her article 'Virtue ethics', Julia Annas argues that virtue ethics assumes that each of us already has a life by the time we start to reflect on which action is the right one. This has two implications. First, we already have some general guidance from the culture in which we grow up, but reflection will reveal that our traditional ethical views are inadequate in some way or other. Our desire to do what is right is an expression of our striving to be better people. Second, we are each at different stages in ethical development and have different aims and ideals in life. Reflecting on what to do, therefore, can't be like using a matter of following an algorithm, like learning to use a computer. There simply cannot be a specification of the 'right action' that is universal, the same for everyone and available to everyone, regardless of what they are like as people already. Becoming virtuous takes experience and practice. No teacher or book can make you virtuous ('follow these simple rules, and you will achieve eudaimonia').

The objection that virtue ethics can't provide guidance on how to act is thinking of guidance too much in terms of rules. Just because practical wisdom is not a set of rules, that doesn't mean it provides no guidance at all. Aristotle's theory suggests we think about situations in terms of the virtues. We can ask a series of questions: 'would this action be kind/courageous/loyal ... ?' or again, since I am deciding how I should act, not how anyone should act, 'what would I do if I were more kind/courageous/loyal...?' Thinking about what to do in this way could be very helpful.

CONFLICTS BETWEEN VIRTUES

A second issue for Aristotle's virtue ethics regards cases of conflict between virtues. For example, can we show justice and mercy, or do we have to choose?

Aristotle denies that conflicts between virtues ever take place. You need practical wisdom to understand what each virtue actually requires you to do in this particular situation. With such understanding, you will be able to discover a path of action which satisfies the demands of each virtue that is relevant to the situation. If you think that mercy requires injustice, or that justice demands being merciless, then you have misunderstood what justice or mercy actually mean in this situation. For example, perhaps we are motivated towards mercy in rectifying an injustice when someone appeals to difficult circumstances or ignorance of the effects of what they did. On Aristotle's analysis, such factors are directly relevant to judging the injustice of the act (whether it is unjust, or done unjustly, or done by an unjust person). So they are relevant to what justice requires of us.

Aristotle explicitly rejects the claim that morality involves absolute or universal rules. It is all a matter of context and judgement, and the idea that we are always pursuing the final end of eudaimonia provides a framework in which to make such judgments. Virtues don't make demands of their own accord, but provides us with various means to achieve eudaimonia. All this makes it easier to resolve potential conflicts.

Nevertheless, whether the theory is convincing in all cases can only be judged by looking at possible counterexamples. For example, could loyalty to a friend ever require you to be dishonest?

THE POSSIBILITY OF CIRCULARITY INVOLVED IN DEFINING VIRTUOUS ACTS AND VIRTUOUS PEOPLE IN TERMS OF EACH OTHER

A third issue relates to Aristotle's accounts of virtuous action and the virtuous person. A simple reading, which causes the problem, is this:

1. an act is virtuous if it is an act that would be done by a virtuous person in this situation;
2. a virtuous person is a person who is disposed to do virtuous acts.

The difficulty with these definitions is that, taken together, they do nothing to clarify what a virtuous act is or what a virtuous person is. For instance, if we substitute the definition of a virtuous person in (1), we get 'an act is virtuous if it is an act that would be done by a person who is disposed to do virtuous acts in this situation'. The definition is circular, because we have used the term 'virtuous act' to define what a virtuous act is! We get the same problem if we substitute the definition of a virtuous act in (2): 'a virtuous person is a person who is disposed to do acts that would be done by a virtuous person'.

One way to solve the problem is to pay closer attention to Aristotle's definitions. A (fully) virtuous act is indeed an act that a virtuous person does, when they know what they are doing and choose the act for its own sake. However, a virtuous person is not simply someone who does virtuous actions. A virtuous person has the virtues, which are traits, including states of character and excellences of reason, that enable them to achieve eudaimonia. States of character relate to our choices and actions, but they are equally concerned with our passions and with what we find pleasure in. And eudaimonia is defined not in terms of virtuous actions, but in terms of many activities 'of the soul', including feeling, thinking and choosing. So while (1) is correct, (2) is too simple.

We could press the objection a different way. We can't tell whether an act is virtuous without knowing whether a virtuous person would do it. And we can't tell whether someone is virtuous without seeing whether they do virtuous acts.

In reply, first, it is true that the criterion for an act being virtuous is that it is an act that a virtuous person would do. But we have a good idea of what a virtuous person is without being able to name particular individuals as virtuous or not. When considering 'what the virtuous person would do', we need not have any specific virtuous person in mind. So to judge whether an act is virtuous, we don't need to first judge that person A is virtuous and then figure out what A would do.

Second, it is true that we infer that someone is virtuous from what they do. But again, this is not the only evidence we have. Virtue is also expressed in emotional responses and pleasure, as well as the quality of someone's thinking. So there is no circularity in establishing whether an act or a person is virtuous.

Annas provides a different, and much simpler, line of response. Virtue ethics does provide an account of virtue action by appealing to what the virtuous person would do. But this shouldn't be understood (as it is in (1) above) as a definition of 'virtuous action' that uses some independent definition of 'virtuous person'. Instead, as we saw above, the account encourages us to think of what I should do in my situation (virtuous action) in terms of what I would do if I were more virtuous (virtuous person). Instead of thinking of the matter from the 'third person' ('what is the definition?', 'how can we tell a virtuous action?'), we should think of it from the first person ('what should I do?').